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The ‘Postmodern Turn’ in the Social Sciences by Simon Susen, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, xi + 510 pp., £?? (Hardback) ISBN 978-0-230-57929-3

This book provides a large-scale analytical review of the ‘footprint’ of postmodernist ideas within social scientific debate and enquiry over the past 30-40 years. Its author, Simon Susen, is an able scholar, as exemplified in his recent astute mediation for Anglophone sociologists and social theorists of Luc Boltanski’s outstanding work. Accordingly, both the ambition and thoroughness of the new book are hailed by an array of prominent people in their supporting cover statements. One claim to distinction is Susen’s intention to provide the sort of comprehensive thematic mapping that will get beneath the level of more accentuated or descriptive approaches to postmodernism, which tend to be couched in terms of individual thinkers, selective issues, and individual disciplines. The second notable feature is that Susen offers his own considered verdict on the central contentions, whilst decently striving to keep this somewhat apart from, and subsequent to, his more open-ended exegeses and exemplifications. The purpose is thus somewhat encyclopaedic in a traditional sense.

The presentation is structured in terms of five main ‘presuppositional’ themes held to run across all discussions of postmodernism in the social sciences: the epistemological, the methodological, the sociological, the historiographical, and the political. Each of these inevitably carries a certain disciplinary orientation, but has a more generic remit too. For example, any take on postmodernism and postmodernity will have to engage with our sense of fundamental changes in social structure, culture, and identity, and will therefore inescapably be ‘sociological’, regardless of the field or literature from which the enquiry derives. And ‘disciplinary’ sociology for its part can hardly avoid the political and normative questions arising from the organizational shift from ‘society as a project’ to ‘projects in society’, as Susen nicely puts it. In that way, an important incidental goal is also achieved, to highlight the substantial degree of commonality across the social sciences (and across the social sciences and humanities), due to the increasing *de facto* interdisciplinarity at work within all the major disciplines on key questions of method and perspective (excepting economics, which, symptomatically, is missing from the exposition). The chapters proceed by identifying a core conceptual ‘turn’ that postmodern challenges to the reigning modernist assumptions has triggered – thus, the relativist turn in epistemology, the interpretive turn in methodology, the cultural turn in sociology, the contingent turn in historiography, and the autonomous turn in politics. This architecture works reasonably well, and the various domains and turns are knowledgeably developed.

That said, I do not think that the book ultimately succeeds. The first major problem is that it is hard to see exactly who this dense and overlapping series of accounts is aimed at, or who is going to be greatly motivated by it. And with a book dealing with postmodernism, this can hardly be a secondary or innocent question. One productive postmodern-ish current in the 1980s – not mentioned by Susen – was the ‘rhetoric of enquiry’ genre, according to which texts should be appreciated on the basis of who they might be *for* before we decide exactly what they are *about* or how *good* they are in some vacant general sense. But neither Bryan Turner, in his prefatory praise for the book, nor the author himself over the course of a forty-page introduction, bothers to identify who the typical reader might be, or in what ways they might consider themselves edified. The most obvious collective candidate is the set of peers

and teachers of social theory in this academic area, as implied in Zygmunt Bauman's blurb that 'the rest of us' now have some catching up to do. But this is a *very* familiar topic field, almost to the point of tedium, because a great many theory teachers at university, college and even high school level, together with an army of published commentators, have been plying the relevant binaries, antinomies, soft and hard versions, stimulating provocations and performative contradictions re postmodernism for thirty-odd years. It is entirely fair to respond that Susen's book at least now becomes the most systematic treatment available; but down these well-worn tracks it's not clear that what we are in need of is greater systematicity, or that the latter brings notably greater insight.

What about students? Or even the ideas-oriented general public, as rather bizarrely implied by Slavoj Žižek's supporting clip ('Everyone has to read it!')? Yet things are not promising here either, due to the repetitiveness and excessive filleting that marks the presentation. Even the diminishing band of theory-hungry doctoral students (the most likely readership) will feel pretty weary before too long, churning their way through the multi-numbered points at issue, the fractionalised dimensions, the subdivided paradigms, gaining relief or clarification only through the extensive, italicised, stentorian wake-up calls that punctuate almost every page, in the overdone manner of: *To put it bluntly, what you must really take from all this is the following encapsulation, notwithstanding the necessity also to bear in mind that there can be no skipping the previous six items just rehearsed....* And as it happens, it doesn't much matter if you do happen to miss something important as the story unwinds, because a 23-page 'conclusion' restates precisely everything that precedes it. (Is that really what being 'systematic' means?)

The second serious difficulty is similarly bound up with the fact that everyone knows this whole epochal slab of theoretical discussion has moved on, even if amorphously. True, most of the 'beyond the impasse' currents flowing today are still, as Susen insists, somewhat haunted by the 'spectre' of the unavoidably Manichean 'debate'. But that is insufficient justification for the strategy adopted in this book, which is chiefly to try to re-run the whole thing again with minimum reference to updates, new contributions, and the changes of heart and tone that come simply with the passage of time. Whether it is a matter of complexity theory, the 'new empiricism', ANT-style questionings of 'the social', varieties of critical pragmatism, restless attempts to relativize without relativism, postsecular and postcolonial uber-challenges, or the partial revival of Marxism, fresh angles and motives are continually being added, and they are not reducible to 'modernism versus postmodernism'. No more than anyone else can Susen himself resist the temptation to project forward, taking time out to appraise cosmopolitanism, for example, in a spirited 'post-post-' manner. Nor can he avoid inadvertently projecting backwards. Critical discourse analysis, for example, is portrayed as coming on to the scene very much as a postmodern method, thus being 'fundamentally different' from modernistic ideology critique (p.73). But key authors in CDA mode don't see it that way, explicitly having sought, *after* the postmodern hit, to retain some philosophically realist elements of structural analysis whilst simultaneously accepting the force of the discursive-linguistic turn. In other words, this is another 'beyond the binary' effort.

In the final substantive chapter, the author sets out his own preferred stance, a kind of qualified modernism. I find this intelligent and persuasive, and broadly speaking it reflects the majority mind-set in social theory. Naturally, there will be grounds for local disputation within that frame. For example, in the chapter on epistemology, Susen italicises that

‘uncompromising opposition to positivist approaches in the social sciences lie at the heart of postmodern theories of knowledge’ (p. 48). This is not wrong as such, but it misleads the naïve reader in at least three ways, a) because post-positivism in philosophy, whether in the analytical mainstream or on the critical fringe, emerged prior to, and independently of, the tide of postmodernism; b) because many post-positivist thinkers retain a minimally realist commitment, whereas the most distinctive conceptual component of strong postmodernism is anti-realism; and c) because serious postmodernists do not seek to provide *alternative* theories of knowledge, they reject epistemology altogether. Other minor complaints concern Susen’s unreflecting acceptance in Chapter 3 of the idea that there was a decisive ‘cultural turn’ in sociology (as though sociology has been anything other than mainly culturalist); and his violently simplistic summation of ‘modern intellectual thought’ in Chapter 4 as the conviction that ‘the course of history is determined by *necessity*’.

A more important bone of contention is Susen’s articulation of the ‘main argument in this study’, namely that the core turn in postmodernism is from the ‘relative determinacy’ to the ‘radical indeterminacy of all material and symbolic forms of existence’ (p.39). For the purposes of cogent exposition, if not for advanced hair-splitting, much depends on this formulation being both felicitous and consensual. But it is actually quite troublesome. Presumably, the ‘debate’ only works properly if we are doing some justice to each side, or being equally caricaturing of both. Yet whilst the caricature of the ‘radical indeterminacy’ of postmodern thinking is certainly what fires up the modernist faithful, *relative* determinacy is *not* what postie iconoclasts usually present as the gist of mechanical modernism. Is this a case of Susen’s considered, qualified modernism interfering with his more ‘neutral’ expository purpose? No, because we have just seen how overstated is his own depiction of the modernist view of history, upon which a whole chapter hangs, with po-mo delight in utter contingency, the zero determination of anything, implausibly pitched as its diametrical opposite.

The danger of serious flip-flopping, compounded by the steady pull towards over-statement, thus becomes apparent. For instance, from an early point in the book, Susen sets up as a primary feature of postmodernism the contention that there can be no universally valid and eternally true understandings of nature, people and society, because all knowledge claims are socially constructed, which is to say strictly relative to context. But a moment’s thought reveals this claim itself as at least relatively deterministic, with the free-floating Platonic take on ideas looking much more *radically* ungrounded. Thereby, Susen’s keystone formulation loosens and cracks. Or again: postmodern sociologists are said to have over-turned the staid old (linear, zombie etc) categories of class, identity, and nation state. But Susen does *not* gloss this move in terms of radical indeterminacy. Rather, postmodern sociologists are said to ‘consider globalization to be one of the central processes shaping the contemporary world’ (p. 128-29), this being exactly the sort of epochal, structurationist way of thinking that is haughtily scorned by the evangelists of lightning-bolt flashes of uncanny illumination. One last example: Marxists who have taken the cultural turn are bracketed to that extent as being on the postmodern side of things, seeing as they are ‘keen to explore various degrees of indeterminacy that are present in highly differentiated societies’ (p. 101). But the investigation of ‘degrees of indeterminacy’, especially in such an eminently patterned context – by the way, how do we *know* a society is ‘highly differentiated’? – amounts to exactly the same thing as the investigation of degrees of relative determinacy, something that in the case

of politics and ideology Marxists of different stripes have been busy addressing since the very outset of their tradition.

We might want to conclude from all this that, whether intentionally or not, Susen's qualified modernist position is skewing his presentation of the two 'sides'. Yes and no. To some extent, if he doesn't 'lend' postmodernism some emphases that according to his own central statement are actually modernist (*relative* determinacy), there would be far less to say about the otherwise unthinkable radical opposition, and the symmetry of the approach would accordingly collapse. The price to pay, however, is the kind of conceptual slipping and category breaching that I have signalled, the sort we are told this book confidently overcomes. We might then be inclined to ask why Susen couldn't have seen all this coming. Yet he *did* see it coming, it's just that he chose to carry on regardless. He knows very well that there is another way, and increasingly preferred way, of understanding postmodernism, namely as the business of posing hard modernist questions to modernism itself, and leaving them hanging. How relative, exactly, is relative determinacy? At what point does multiple relationality cancel out specific determinacy and usher in unmanageable plurality? Is there not some larger human rationale for breaking free of, and getting perspective on, the (necessary) achievements of analytical reason itself? Paradoxically or not, qualified modernism is bound to come out of that reflective encounter looking all the stronger, and Susen's book is certainly an illustration of this dialectic. Nevertheless, whilst necessarily wooden contrapositions were, a decade or two ago, the best way to attain that higher vantage point, and whilst they remain useful in the classroom (if kept tolerably brief), grinding through them all again in order to get to today's acknowledged starting points represents dubious use of a smart author's time.

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